

SFMO-FFF2404

Texas State Fire Marshal's Office

# Firefighter Fatality Investigation

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Fire Chief Zeb Smith  
Fritch Volunteer Fire Department

**TDI** | Texas Department  
of Insurance



# Overview

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[State law](#) requires the State Fire Marshal's Office (SFMO) to investigate firefighter fatalities that happen in the line of duty or in connection with an on-duty incident. SFMO must investigate the circumstances of the death, including any contributing factors.

Chief Zeb Smith's death was included in the 2024 Firefighter Fatality Investigation Annual Report.

The goal of this report is to encourage the Fritch Volunteer Fire Department to continue to improve fire service best practices listed in the recommendations to reduce firefighter risk exposure.

## Acknowledgments

These entities helped with the fatality investigation and report:

- Borger Fire Department
- Fort Worth Fire Department
- Fritch Police Department
- Fritch Volunteer Fire Department
- Hutchinson County Fire Marshal
- Hutchinson County Sheriff's Office
- Red Oak Fire/Rescue
- Texas Department of Public Safety
- Texas Panhandle Forensics
- Texas Parks and Wildlife Game Wardens

Texas Fire Service representatives from these organizations reviewed this report:

- State Firefighters' and Fire Marshals' Association
- Texas A&M Engineering and Extension Service
- Texas A&M Forest Service
- Texas Chapter of the International Association of Arson Investigators
- Texas Commission on Fire Protection
- Texas Fire Chiefs Association
- Texas Fire Marshals' Association
- Texas State Association of Firefighters

# Background

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Borger Central Dispatch notified SFMO on March 5, 2024, that Fire Chief Zeb Smith died at the hospital after suffering an event during suppression operations at a house fire.

SFMO Lieutenants Reece Oestreich and Tim Ware investigated the fatality.

## Fritch Volunteer Fire Department

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The Fritch Volunteer Fire Department (Fritch VFD) was chartered in 1959.

- One station.
- 26 firefighters.
- Serves 2,117 Texans.
- 1.6 square mile service area.
- Averages 400 service calls each year.



## Fire Chief Zeb Smith, 40 years old

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November 14, 1983-March 5, 2024

Chief Smith's work experience with Fritch VFD:

- November 2017 – Began his career with Fritch VFD.
- May 2020 – Became the department's fire chief.
- August 2022 – Completed the State Firefighters' and Fire Marshals' Association's Fire Chief Development Program.



Chief Smith also went to many Texas A&M Engineering and Extension Service, National Fire Academy, and FEMA training courses.

## Medical history

It's unknown if Chief Smith had any known significant personal medical history before his death. Family and friends reported that he didn't go to the doctor often and didn't know if he had any medical issues.

## Texas Intrastate Fire Mutual Aid System

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The Texas Intrastate Fire Mutual Aid System (TIFMAS) was created to use local resources statewide through Strike Teams. It's sponsored, maintained, and mobilized by the Texas A&M Forest Service. Firefighters are credentialed through TIFMAS using the National Wildfire Coordinating Group training standards.



At the time of the incident, a TIFMAS Strike Team was in the area helping with the wildland fire outbreak in North Texas. The Strike Team included members from the Fort Worth Fire Department (FD), Red Oak Fire/Rescue, Waco FD, Brownwood FD, and Lancaster FD.

# Incident timeline

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**Location:** 803 South Cornell Avenue, Fritch, Texas

**Time:** 7:21 a.m.–8:46 a.m.

**Description:**

- House fire.
- Front door on the west side.
- Smoke coming from the back of the house on the east side.

- Time recorded and confirmed by Borger Central Dispatch (BCD).
- Time approximated from interviews, statements, recordings, and incident reports.

## March 5, 2024

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- 7:21 a.m.      Someone sees black smoke coming from a vent on house and calls 911.  
  
BCD answers the call and sends out an Active 911 message and radio dispatch.
- 7:21 a.m.      Chief Smith calls the Strike Team leader at the Borger base camp on his cell phone to ask for help with a house fire.
- 7:25 a.m.      A Fritch Police Officer, a Texas Department of Public Safety State Trooper, and three Texas Game Wardens hear the radio dispatch and arrive on scene. Flames are seen coming from the back of the house.  
  
The state trooper and one of the game wardens body cameras start recording.  
  
The Fritch VFD assistant chief arrives on scene in his personal vehicle and street clothes.
- 7:26 a.m.      Chief Smith arrives on scene. He tells BCD there's, "Heavy smoke coming out of residence. No flames visible."
- 7:28 a.m.      The state trooper and Fritch Police Officer force open the front door. The officer enters and crawls under the smoke into the living room. The officer doesn't find anyone in the house and leaves.
- 7:30 a.m.      Chief Smith approaches the front door with his personal protective equipment, including pants, coat, helmet, boots, gloves, hood, and his self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA).  
  
Chief Smith and the Fritch VFD assistant chief have a conversation on the front porch. The assistant chief tells Chief Smith to "slow down and not go in and to wait for fire equipment to arrive." During this conversation Chief Smith puts on his SCBA, hood, and gloves.

- 7:31 a.m. Chief Smith enters the house carrying hand tools. The door closes behind him and stays closed.
- 7:38 a.m. Borger EMS arrives on scene.
- 7:39 a.m. Part of the Strike Team, Red Oak Fire/Rescue, arrive on scene and position their engine in front of the house.  
  
Fritch VFD assistant chief tells responders Chief Smith is in the house.  
  
Hutchinson County Fire Marshal tells BCD that "One firefighter made entry. Did not exit. Organize search and rescue. Crews immediately transfer from fire suppression to firefighter rescue mode."
- 7:40 a.m. Fritch VFD fire engine arrives on scene.
- 7:42 a.m. Crews force entry through the front door, find Chief Smith and remove him from the house.  
  
Chief Smith is unresponsive and not breathing. EMS begins CPR and advanced life support measures.  
  
It was noted that Chief Smith wasn't wearing his SCBA face mask when he was removed from the house, the gauge on his SCBA bottle read zero, and personal alert safety system (PASS) alarm didn't sound.
- 8:03 a.m. Borger EMS transports Chief Smith to the Golden Plains Community Hospital.
- 8:31 a.m. Borger EMS arrives at the hospital.
- 8:46 a.m. Hospital doctor pronounces Chief Smith dead.

## March 6, 2024

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- 8:18 a.m. Texas Panhandle Forensics conducts an autopsy on Chief Smith.  
  
The forensics team lists the cause of death as chronic ischemic heart disease due to hypertensive cardiovascular disease. Other significant findings included coronary artery disease and obesity.

## Findings and recommendations

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These recommendations may not have prevented Chief Smith's death. However, they're based on nationally recognized fire service standards and safety practices. Fire departments and firefighting personnel should know and understand these standards. Links to the resources referenced below are available at [tdi.texas.gov/fire/resources/html](https://tdi.texas.gov/fire/resources/html).

### No health or wellness program at Fritch VFD.

Fritch VFD firefighters don't have to take part in a health, wellness, or physical fitness program.

#### Background

Heart attacks were the leading cause of on-duty firefighter fatalities in 2023, accounting for 40% of firefighter deaths.

#### Recommendation

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Reduce heart attack risk by following National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 1582, 2022 edition and NFPA 1583, 2022 edition guidelines.

### No radio communication between Strike Team and others.

Strike Team members didn't have radio communication with dispatch or local emergency responders. Instead, members relied on cell phones, limiting emergency communication.

#### Background

The NFPA recommends firefighters have equipment to communicate with the incident commander, division or group supervisors, or branch divisions.

#### Recommendation

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Maintain radio communication with all emergency personnel on scene as recommended by NFPA 1720, Chapter 4.8.3, 2020 edition.

### Chief Smith didn't follow incident guidelines.

Chief Smith entered the house without doing a 360 size-up and before equipped fire personnel were on scene.

It's unknown if Chief Smith saw the state trooper and Fritch Police Officer force open the front door to clear the living room.

#### Background

The fire service standard is to arrive on scene and conduct a 360-degree assessment and exterior exam before entering a structure. This gives the incident commander the details needed to plan an attack on the fire and the degree of occupant survivability, if any. Failure to perform size-up or to perform a complete size-up is an improper risk assessment.

The NFPA recommends assigning an incident commander to coordinate all activities during the incident and track everyone on scene.

Individual orders, particularly verbal orders, should go through the company officer/crew leader. The company officer/crew leader should know all members' names, where they are, and what they're doing.

The NFPA also recommends having at least four people available before starting interior fire suppression operations in a hazardous area, including:

- At least two people in the hazardous area.
- At least two people outside the hazardous area to help or rescue the team in the hazardous area.

### Recommendation

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Provide added safety for firefighters by using the two in, two out rule and following NFPA 1720, Chapters 4.5-4.6, 2020 edition and International Fire Service Training Association's Essentials of Firefighting, 7th edition (IFSTA EOF 7), Chapter 19: Incident Scene Operations guidelines.

### Chief Smith entered the house without a communication device.

When Chief Smith entered the house, he didn't have a portable handheld radio or a way to communicate with other emergency responders.

### Background

The International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) instructs every firefighter on the fireground to have a portable radio or two-way communications device, preferably with an attached lapel microphone. This lets each firefighter quickly report, or be notified of, hazardous conditions or emergencies like a missing or injured firefighter or potential or impending building collapse.

### Recommendation

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Maintain radio communication with all on scene emergency personnel by following IAFC and IFSTA EOF 7, Chapter 2: Communications guidelines.

### Chief Smith's personal protection equipment wasn't maintained.

Chief Smith was found about 12 minutes after he entered the house with no air in his SCBA. It was also noted that the PASS device on the SCBA wasn't working because there were no batteries in the device. Because the PASS device was inoperative, no one knew when Chief Smith became motionless.

### Background

A PASS alarm is activated when a firefighter is motionless for more than 30 seconds or presses the emergency button.

SCBA should be checked at the beginning of each on-duty shift. If that's not possible, then it should be checked weekly. This weekly testing should include:

- Checking gauges to make sure they are within the manufacturer's recommended limits and the tank is full.
- Testing valves to make sure they work and are in the correct position.
- Looking for tears in straps and making sure they're fully extended.
- Testing the low-pressure alarm and PASS device.
- Checking all battery-powered functions.

## Recommendation

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Follow NFPA 1852, 2019 edition and IFSTA EOF 7, Chapter 5: Firefighter Personal Protective Equipment guidelines.

## Fritch VFD didn't have standard operating procedures.

Fire department policies and procedures help guide day-to-day internal operations, emergency responses, and individual firefighter conduct. Standard operating procedures help firefighters understand and meet expectations and safety guidelines.

## Background

The NFPA recommends organizing fire suppression operations to make sure the fire department's fire suppression capability includes enough personnel, equipment, and other resources to deploy efficiently, effectively, and safely. The authority with jurisdiction over the fire department should issue the organizational, operational, and deployment procedures through written administrative regulations, standard operating procedures, and departmental orders. Procedures should clearly provide command succession.

## Recommendation

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Fire departments should create, maintain, and educate personnel on standard operating procedures and safety guidelines to make sure operations are effective, efficient, and safe. Departments should follow NFPA 1720 Chapter 4.1, 2020 edition and the IFSTA EOF 7, Chapter 1: Introduction to the Fire Service and Firefighter Safety guidelines.



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